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SOME LAND USE READJUSTMENTS IN THE GREAT PLAINS REGION

A radio talk by Sherman E. Johnson, Director, Region 7, Program Planning Division, A.A.A., broadcast Friday, May 31, 1935, in the conservation day program, National Farm and Home Hour, by 60 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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Many changes in land use are under way in the Great Plains region. Last year, drought and dust storms swept through it. Early this spring the dust storms came again, centering largely in the Southwest. The Northwestern plains have received sufficient spring moisture, and recent rains have helped the Southwest.

With this rain we may think, "happy days are here again" and we can forget the drought, dust, and discouragement." But effects of the dry years were too severe for us to forget their lessons so soon.

When the Great Plains were first homesteaded, the nation had not had enough experience to find the proper use for that land. Much of this country was homesteaded and planted just before and during the war. These were years of unusually high rainfall and, while the old-time ranchers told the homesteaders crops could not be grown, they did grow them - for a few years - and the boom was on. But scanty rainfall and low prices soon followed. Plowed land had no protection from wind like the tough native sod, and fertile top soil was piled along roadsides, fence rows, and buildings.

Attempts to farm the western edge of the plains have created a "new public domain." The homesteader earned title to the old public domain by his attempt to farm it and make a home. But where this attempt failed, the land went back to counties for taxes, and to public agencies which had made loans on it. More than half the agricultural land in some counties is now subject to tax deed or foreclosed by public lending agencies.

Now, after years of costly trials by individual farmers and with information accumulated from years of experiments, we can more easily determine the best use for certain lands, considering stability of income for the operator and the community, and protection of the nation's soil and water resources. Properly handled, most of this land can remain in crops, but in some areas more of it should be used for permanent pasture. Some land now in farms is better suited for other uses, such as grazing, forestry, recreation and game preservation. We are seeking to cooperate with local people in making these changes through a purely voluntary program.

During the past year the federal landpurchase program has made a beginning in shifting land in the Great Plains into uses already proven best for it. Several purchase projects have been established to shift unsuccessful farm land to a permanent grazing use. Such land borders between land suitable for permanent crop production and land which no one has tried to farm. In an occasional year of good rainfall it will produce a satisfactory crop, but in the more frequent dry years it brings a chain of feed and seed loans, Red Cross and relief aid, tax delinquency, foreclosures and soil exploitation. In many such areas the relief and emergency loan expenditures for the past five years have exceeded a reasonable value of the land.

Such wastage in human and natural resources must be ended; first, by finding other opportunities for many of the present inhabitants, and second, by controlling  
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the future use of such land and protecting and developing it to conserve soil and water resources.

Although most of this land is well suited for grazing, the homestead era has left such a checkerboarded ownership pattern that stockmen can not lease large enough tracts on a long term basis to insure them an adequate living. Land purchased by the Government will be blocked out into suitable grazing units and leased to associations of stockmen, thus insuring a table tenure, and preventing overgrazing.

Some land being purchased has been so badly damaged by wind that the immediate aim will be to grow a cover crop on it which will prevent it from drifting onto more productive adjoining lands. Permanent restoration will be difficult.

There are few natural timber areas in the Great Plains east of the foothills of the Rockies. National forests have already been established in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. Because of the local scarcity of trees, some land is being bought in this region to convert natural timber areas into permanent forests which will furnish timber and recreation for the surrounding population, as well as protection for wild game.

Some smaller areas which have both natural timber and possibilities for water development seem best suited for exclusive recreational use and are being purchased for state parks. These will furnish recreation to nearby rural areas and surrounding towns. Anyone who has lived in the eastern plains region and experienced the almost complete absence of such recreational opportunities will welcome this phase of the program. A number of game preserves are also being established in suitable areas for the protection of upland game and migratory waterfowl.

Land Purchases are being made on Indian reservations to eliminate scattered white ownership.

State agencies and local communities have helped to plan all of the land purchases. All sales have been entirely voluntary.

We realize the land purchase program deals only with a small part of the whole land use problem of the Great Plains. Other phases of it require other solutions.

This program does, however, represent a concrete effort to shift the use of some land toward a greater permanent income and greater enjoyment for the people of the area and for the entire nation.

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